

What is claimed is:

- 1 1. A method for selling a product from a vending machine, the product identity  
2 being concealed at the time of offer, the method comprising:  
3 maintaining a database of product data, including normal price data and  
4 minimum acceptable price data for each of a plurality of products;  
5 identifying a monetary value available for purchasing a product;  
6 selecting a product from among the plurality of products based on the  
7 monetary value and the minimum acceptable price data;  
8 outputting via an output device an offer of the product to a consumer;  
9 determining whether the consumer accepts the offer; and  
10 dispensing the product if the consumer accepts the product, thereby revealing  
11 the identity of the product to the consumer.
- 1 2. The method of claim 1, further comprising receiving the monetary value from  
2 the consumer.
- 1 3. The method of claim 2, wherein the step of receiving the monetary value  
2 includes receiving a credit card account identifier.
- 1 4. The method of claim 2, wherein the step of receiving the monetary value  
2 includes receiving a smart card identifier.
- 1 5. The method of claim 2, wherein the step of receiving the monetary value  
2 includes receiving an electronic representation of currency.

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1 6. The method of claim 1, wherein the database further includes category data for  
2 each of the plurality of products, and wherein the step of selecting is further based on  
3 the category data.

1 7. The method of claim 6, further including receiving a category selection from  
2 the consumer.

1 8. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of selecting a product includes  
2 selecting a combination of products.

1 9. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of maintaining includes determining  
2 minimum acceptable price data based on sales activity.

1 10. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of identifying includes receiving  
2 minimum acceptable price data from an operator.

1 11. The method of claim 1, further comprising the step of determining whether the  
2 monetary value is at least as great as the lowest minimum acceptable price, and  
3 wherein the step of offering is performed only upon determining that the monetary  
4 value is at least as great as the lowest minimum acceptable price.

1 12. The method of claim 1, wherein the step of determining includes providing a  
2 predetermined amount of time during which the consumer may refuse to accept the  
3 product.

1 13. The method of claim 1, wherein the database further includes expiration data  
2 for  
3 each of the plurality of products and wherein the step of selecting is further based on  
4 the  
5 expiration data.

1 14. The method of claim 1, wherein the database further includes profitability data  
2 for each of the plurality of products and wherein the step of selecting is further based  
3 on the profitability data.

1 15. The method of claim 1, wherein the database further includes demand data for  
2 each of the plurality of products and wherein the step of selecting is further based on  
3 the demand data.

1 16. A method for selling a product from a vending machine, the product identity  
2 being concealed at the time of offer, the method comprising:  
3 maintaining a database of product data, including normal price data and  
4 minimum acceptable price data for each of a plurality of products;  
5 receiving a first monetary value from a consumer;  
6 receiving a selection of a first product from the consumer;  
7 retrieving a price of the first product from the database of product data;  
8 calculating a second monetary value, the second monetary value being the  
9 difference between the first monetary value and the price of the first product.

10 selecting a second product from among the plurality of products based on the  
11 second monetary value and the minimum acceptable price data;  
12 outputting via an output device an offer of the second product to the  
13 consumer;  
14 determining whether the consumer accepts the offer; and  
15 dispensing the product if the consumer accepts the product, thereby revealing  
16 the identity of the product to the consumer.

1 17. The method of claim 16, further comprising:  
2 calculating an additional amount, the additional amount being the difference  
3 between the second monetary value and the minimum acceptable price of the second  
4 product; and  
5 prompting the consumer to supply funds at least equal to the additional  
6 amount.

1 18. The method of claim 16, wherein the database further includes complementary  
2 product data for each of the plurality of products and wherein the step of selecting is  
3 further based on the first product and the complementary product data for the first  
4 product.

1 19. An automatic sales machine for selling a product, the product identity being  
2 concealed at the time of offer, the sales machine comprising:  
3 a processor;  
4 a memory connected to said processor storing a program to control the  
5 operation of said processor;

6 the processor operative with the program in the memory to:

7 maintain a database of product data, including normal price data and

8 minimum acceptable price data for each of a plurality of products;

9 identify a monetary value available for purchasing a product;

10 select a product from among the plurality of products based on the

11 monetary value and the minimum acceptable price data;

12 output via an output device an offer of the product to a consumer;

13 determine whether the consumer accepts the offer; and

14 dispense the product if the consumer accepts the product, thereby

15 revealing the identity of the product to the consumer.

1 20. The automatic sales machine of claim 19, wherein the processor is further

2 operative with the program in the memory to determine the monetary value received

3 from the consumer.

1 21. The automatic sales machine of claim 20, wherein the database further

2 includes category data for each of the plurality of products and wherein the step of

3 selecting is further based on the category data.

1 22. The automatic sales machine of claim 19, wherein the processor is further

2 operative with the program in the memory to receive a category selection from the

3 consumer.

1 23. The automatic sales machine of claim 19, wherein the processor is further

2 operative with the program in the memory to select a combination of products.

1 24. The automatic sales machine of claim 19, wherein the processor is further  
2 operative with the program in the memory to determine minimum acceptable price  
3 data based on sales activity.

1 25. The automatic sales machine of claim 19, wherein the processor is further  
2 operative with the program in the memory to receive minimum acceptable price data  
3 from an operator.

1 26. The automatic sales machine of claim 19, wherein the processor is further  
2 operative with the program in the memory to determine whether the monetary value is  
3 at least as great as the lowest minimum acceptable price, and to offer the product  
4 performed only upon determining that the monetary value is at least as great as the  
5 lowest minimum acceptable price.

1 27. The automatic sales machine of claim 19, wherein the processor is further  
2 operative with the program in the memory to provide a predetermined amount of time  
3 during which the consumer may refuse to accept the product.

1 28. The automatic sales machine of claim 19, wherein the database further  
2 includes expiration data for each of the plurality of products and wherein the  
3 processor is further operative with the program in the memory to select the product  
4 based on the expiration data.

1 29. The automatic sales machine of claim 19, wherein the database further  
2 includes profitability data for each of the plurality of products and wherein the  
3 processor is further operative with the program in the memory to select the product  
4 based on the profitability data.

1 30. The automatic sales machine of claim 19, wherein the database further  
2 includes demand data for each of the plurality of products and wherein the processor  
3 is further operative with the program in the memory to select the product based on the  
4 demand data.

1 31. An automatic sales machine for selling a product, the product identity being  
2 concealed at the time of offer, the sales machine comprising:  
3 a processor;  
4 a memory connected to said processor storing a program to control the  
5 operation of said processor;  
6 the processor operative with the program in the memory to:  
7 maintain a database of product data, including normal price data and  
8 minimum acceptable price data for each of a plurality of products;  
9 receive a first monetary value from a consumer;  
10 receive a selection of a first product from the consumer;  
11 retrieve a price of the first product from the database of product data;  
12 calculate a second monetary value, the second monetary value being  
13 the difference between the first monetary value and the price of the first product.  
14 select a second product from among the plurality of products based on  
15 the second monetary value and the minimum acceptable price data;

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16                   output via an output device an offer of the second product to the  
17   consumer;  
18                   determine whether the consumer accepts the offer; and  
19                   dispense the product if the consumer accepts the product, thereby revealing the  
20   identity of the product to the consumer.

1   32.    The automatic sales machine of claim 31, wherein the processor is further  
2   operative with the program in the memory to:  
3           calculate an additional amount, the additional amount being the difference  
4   between the second monetary value and the minimum acceptable price of the second  
5   product; and  
6           prompt the consumer to supply funds at least equal to the additional amount.

1   33.    The automatic sales machine of claim 31, wherein the database further  
2   includes complementary product data for each of the plurality of products and  
3   wherein the processor is further operative with the program in the memory to select  
4   the product based on the initial product and the complementary product data for the  
5   initial product.

1   34.    An automatic sales machine for selling a product, the product identity being  
2   concealed at the time of offer, the sales machine comprising:  
3           means for maintaining a database of product data, including normal price data  
4   and minimum acceptable price data for each of a plurality of products;  
5           means for identifying a monetary value available for purchasing a product;



6 means for selecting a product from among the plurality of products based on  
7 the monetary value and the minimum acceptable price data;

8 means for outputting via an output device an offer of the product to a  
9 consumer;

10 means for determining whether the consumer accepts the offer; and

11 means for dispensing the product if the consumer accepts the product, thereby  
12 revealing the identity of the product to the consumer.

1 35. The automatic sales machine of claim 34, further comprising means for  
2 receiving the monetary value from the consumer.

1 36. The automatic sales machine of claim 34, wherein the database further  
2 includes category data for each of the plurality of products and wherein the means for  
3 selecting is further based on the category data.

1 37. The automatic sales machine of claim 34, further comprising means for  
2 receiving a category selection from the consumer.

1 38. The automatic sales machine of claim 34, wherein the means for selecting a  
2 product includes means for selecting a combination of products.

1 39. The automatic sales machine of claim 34, wherein the means for maintaining  
2 includes means for determining minimum acceptable price data based on sales  
3 activity.

1 40. The automatic sales machine of claim 34, wherein the means for identifying  
2 includes means for receiving minimum acceptable price data from an operator.

1 41. The automatic sales machine of claim 34, further comprising means for  
2 determining whether the monetary value is at least as great as the lowest minimum  
3 acceptable price, and wherein the means for offering is operative only upon  
4 determining that the monetary value is at least as great as the lowest minimum  
5 acceptable price.

1 42. The automatic sales machine of claim 34, wherein the means for determining  
2 includes means for providing a predetermined amount of time during which the  
3 consumer may refuse to accept the product.

1 43. The automatic sales machine of claim 34, wherein the database further  
2 includes expiration data for each of the plurality of products and wherein the means  
3 for selecting operates based on the expiration data.

1 44. The automatic sales machine of claim 34, wherein the database further  
2 includes profitability data for each of the plurality of products and wherein the means  
3 for selecting operates based on the profitability data.

1 45. The automatic sales machine of claim 34, wherein the database further  
2 includes demand data for each of the plurality of products and wherein the means for  
3 selecting operates based on the demand data.

46. An automatic sales machine for selling a product, the product identity being concealed at the time of offer, the sales machine comprising:

means for maintaining a database of product data, including normal price data and minimum acceptable price data for each of a plurality of products;

means for receiving a first monetary value from a consumer;

means for receiving a selection of a first product from the consumer;

means for retrieving a price of the first product from the database of product data;

means for calculating a second monetary value, the second monetary value being the difference between the first monetary value and the price of the first product.

means for selecting a second product from among the plurality of products based on the second monetary value and the minimum acceptable price data;

means for outputting via an output device an offer of the second product to the consumer;

means for determining whether the consumer accepts the offer; and

means for dispensing the product if the consumer accepts the product, thereby revealing the identity of the product to the consumer.

47. The automatic sales machine of claim 46, further comprising:

means for calculating an additional amount, the additional amount being the difference between the monetary value and the minimum acceptable price of the second product; and

means for prompting the consumer to supply funds at least equal to the additional amount.

1 48. The automatic sales machine of claim 46, wherein the database further  
2 includes complementary product data for each of the plurality of products and  
3 wherein the means for selecting operates based on the initial product and the  
4 complementary product data for the initial product.

1 49. A computer-readable storage medium encoded with processing instructions for  
2 implementing a method for selling a product from a vending machine, the product  
3 identity being concealed at the time of offer, the processing instructions for directing a  
4 computer to perform the steps of:

5 maintaining a database of product data, including normal price data and  
6 minimum acceptable price data for each of a plurality of products;

7 identifying a monetary value available for purchasing a product;

8 selecting a product from among the plurality of products based on the  
9 monetary value and the minimum acceptable price data;

10 offering the product to a consumer via an output device;

11 determining whether the consumer accepts the product; and

12 dispensing the product if the consumer accepts the product, thereby revealing  
13 the identity of the product to the consumer.

1 50. A computer-readable storage medium encoded with processing instructions for  
2 implementing a method for selling a product from a vending machine, the product  
3 identity being concealed at the time of offer, the processing instructions for directing a  
4 computer to perform the steps of:

5 maintaining a database of product data, including normal price data and  
 6 minimum acceptable price data for each of a plurality of products;  
 7 receiving a first monetary value from a consumer;  
 8 receiving a selection of a first product from the consumer;  
 9 retrieving a price of the first product from the database of product data;  
 10 calculating a second monetary value, the second monetary value being the  
 11 difference between the first monetary value and the price of the first product.  
 12 selecting a second product from among the plurality of products based on the  
 13 second monetary value and the minimum acceptable price data;  
 14 outputting via an output device an offer of the second product to the  
 15 consumer;  
 16 determining whether the consumer accepts the offer; and  
 17 dispensing the product if the consumer accepts the product, thereby revealing  
 18 the identity of the product to the consumer.

1 51. ~~A method for buying a product from a vending machine, the product identity~~  
 2 ~~being concealed at the time of purchase, the method comprising:~~  
 3 ~~depositing a monetary value available for purchasing a product;~~  
 4 ~~receiving an offer to purchase a product, the product having a concealed~~  
 5 ~~identity;~~  
 6 ~~providing an indication of accepting the offer; and~~  
 7 ~~receiving the product.~~

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